

**The Melting Pot of Modernity and Unity: Images of Tewodros II in Foreign and Domestic Media<sup>1</sup>****Abebe Fentahun Misiker<sup>2</sup>****Abstract**

After 1960s Tewodros II of Ethiopia has been elucidated popularly in foreign and Ethiopian Media as well. Since then, he was portrayed as a national hero of the country. Yet, some foreign media had a different position in describing the aforementioned melting pot of modernity and unity in the history Ethiopian. They stated him from “crazy king” to “national hero”. The BBC witness program broadcasted that Emperor Tewodros II was one of the titanic figures of modern Ethiopian history. While the Telegraph described him as a “mad king of Abyssinia”. Hence, the statements of Media with regard to Tewodros II and his fall at Maqdala will be discussed through different topics of study. Hence, an in-depth study of Media reactions to the battle of Maqdala as seen in foreign and domestic media would require considerable study. The fall of Tewodros II at the battle of Maqdala in 10 April 1868 has become a topic of dialogue and media coverage up to date. Most of the publications represent the battle and the Emperor in different views. Thus, the views and interpretations of media, both foreign and domestic, could be reviewed in detail through this study. The paper argues that the battle of Maqdala and suicidal death of Tewodros II created a long lasting impression to both foreign and domestic media in their perception of the emperor and creating up of modern Ethiopia. Indeed, without Tewodros no modern and united Ethiopia could be formed.

**Key words:** Tewodros II, Maqdala, Mass Media, Modernity and Unity.

**Introduction**

Before the rise of Emperor Tewodros II (r. 1855-68), the Christian Kingdom went through a period of great crisis called *Zemene Mesafint* (Era of Princes) for about a century. The *Zamana Masafent* was a period during which Ethiopia was divided in to several regions with no effective central authority<sup>3</sup>. The period was also characterized by endless civil wars. Peasants had been impoverished and made insecure as a result of the frequent wars. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church suffered from internal division caused by doctrinal issues. Foreign threats against the survival of Ethiopian independence had been another feature of the Era of Princes. This period of general crisis came to an end with the rise of Kasa Hailu.<sup>4</sup>

Kassa Hailu, the later Emperor Tewodros II was born in 1818 at the district of Quara<sup>5</sup>, Northwestern Ethiopia. Scholars identified him as an example of rising from a humble background, like “rising from

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<sup>3</sup> Shiferaw Bekele (1990), *The State in the Zamana Masafent (1786-1853): An Essay in Reinterpretation*, Kassa and Kassa, *Papers on the Lives, Times and Images of Tewodros II and Yohannes IV (1855-1889)* (Eds. Taddese Beyene, Richard Pankhurst & Shiferaw Bekele), p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Tesema Ta'a, (1990), Prologue to the Ethio-Sudanese Frontier, in *Kassa and Kassa, Papers on the Lives, Times and Images of Tewodros II and Yohannes IV (1855-1889)* (Eds. Taddese Beyene, Richard Pankhurst & Shiferaw Bekele), P. 274.

<sup>5</sup> Ghelawdewos Araia, (2006), *The Great Unifier: Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia*, Institute of Development and Education for Africa (IDEA), Inc. , [http://www.africanidea.org/emperor\\_tewdros.pdf](http://www.africanidea.org/emperor_tewdros.pdf)

the dust.”<sup>6</sup>From 1852 to 1855 he made successful campaigns against several regional lords and crowned by the name Tewodros II.<sup>7</sup>

Tewodros wanted to restore imperial power. His very interest was to become a ruler of an empire that was politically united, properly administered and free from foreign threats. He is regarded as an architect of national unity, innovator of modernization, and symbol of national pride.<sup>8</sup> A well-known painter of Ethiopia, Afework Tekle has painted this picture which shows the determination of Tewodros II for national unity.



Fig. 1. Tewodros and Ethiopian Unity (he wished to see such a united Ethiopia), Adopted from Kasa and Kasa (1990) p.189; Tewodros and Ethiopian Unity: study for a postage stamp, by Afework Tekle.

## Imaging of Tewodros before 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Since he detained Europeans, Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia has got considerable media attention. As a result, (During British Expedition to Ethiopia) the following representatives of the press were sent to Ethiopia together with the forces of Gen. Napier. These were H. Stanley from "New York Herald", Viscount Adare, from "Daily Telegraph", C. Austin, Esq... D.C.L., from "Times", G. A. Henty, Esq., from the "Standard" and "Pioneer", Lieutenant F. A. Shepherd, M.A., Bombay Volunteers, from "Daily News" and "Times of India", Lieutenant W. O. Whiteside, late 18th Hussars, from "Morning Post", and C. Simpson, from "Illustrated London News."<sup>9</sup>

The "dramatic suicide" of Atse Tewodros at Maqdala<sup>10</sup> became one of Media- mantra. Thus, after some time, this correspondents have published their mission. For instance, On May 30, 1868 the

<sup>6</sup>Tewodros Gebre (2013) Period, History, and the Literary Art: Historicizing Amharic Novels, *Northeast African Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 19-52, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup>Donald Crummy, (1975), Čäčäho and the politics of the northern Wällo-Bägémder border, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, (Vol. 13, No. 1 pp. 1-9), P. 8

<sup>8</sup>Tewodros Gebre, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup>Trevenen Holland & Henry Hozier, (1870), Record of Expedition to Ethiopia, London, V. II page 430.)

<sup>10</sup> Tewodros Gebre, p. 26.



Illustrated London News published the image of Emperor Tewodros II, based on a sketch by a British officer Major Leveson.

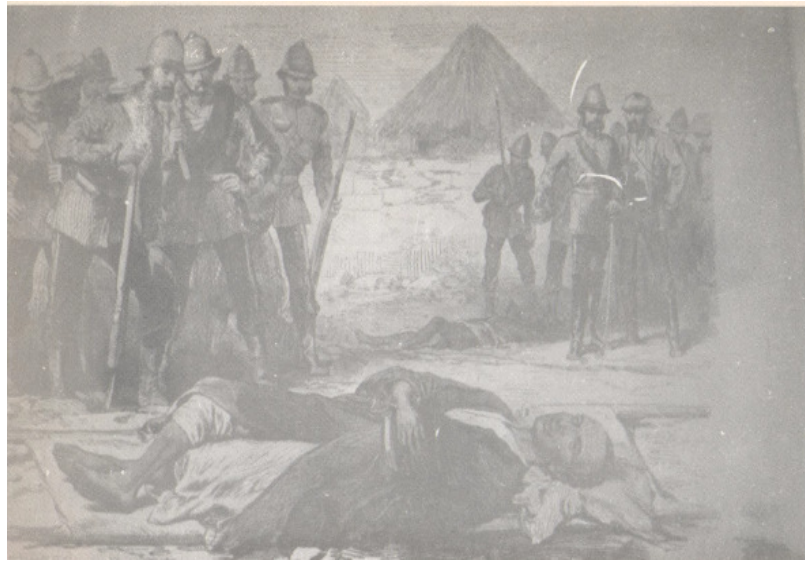


Figure 2: Tewodros II of Ethiopia, as he lay dead at Magdala, April 13, based on a sketch by a British officer. Major Leveson, from the Illustrated London News, May 30, 1868. *Source: Richard Pankhurst (1987) Tewodros II as depicted in European Engravings.*

Within this picture, Tewodros II was seen "laid upon a hammock in the camp at Magdala, surrounded by a guard of British soldiers."<sup>11</sup> This newspaper stated him as a "negro face laid down". Besides, his hair is seen finely cut. It was said that the British soldiers have cut all of his hair and shared among themselves. Some of his hair is on show at London's National Army Museum. The sketch tries to show him as skinny. Because it is reported that he had refused to take any food during the last three or four days before his death<sup>12</sup>.

After a year, another, very different image of the Emperor Tewodros II was published in *Le Tour du Monde* (1869). The picture looks like this.



<sup>11</sup> Richard Pankhurst (1987) Tewodros II as Depicted in European Engravings, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, (Vol. 20, pp. 75-96), p. 94.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*

Figure 2: Tewodros II of Ethiopia as he lay dead at Maqdala

Source: Richard Pankhurst (1987) Tewodros II as Depicted in European Engravings.

This picture “has an agonized look” stated Richard Pankhurst. It is not only agonizing, but also disrespectfully drawn picture. Besides, the pistol with which he committed suicide, is not shown in this picture. Moreover, none of the plundered treasures were identified.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to treasures, foreign media tells different information through different periods. First it was said “... No booty was found at Maqdala”.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, “... nothing in the British Museum’s collection has obtained illegally.”<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, “Looted Ethiopian treasures in UK could be returned on loan”<sup>16</sup> All of these different interests of the British government were also expressed through these media.

## Imaging Tewodros II After 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After 1960s the foreign media changed their mind in describing Emperor Tewodros II – from Negro to Hero. Particularly, Emperor Tewodros II deserved tremendous popularization from the side of the Ethiopian mass media since 1960s. This popularization has reached the highest stage during the early periods of Ethiopian Revolution.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, foreign media also began ‘heroification’ of Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia. The most important one in this regard is the BBC radio broadcast, titled the Witness, and has broadcasted “the Fall of Emperor Tewodros II”. This was broadcasted on 23 March 2016.

It has included the following wonderfully articulated statements. Emperor Tewodros II is one of the towering figures of modern Ethiopian history.<sup>18</sup> He brought an end to the period of Chaos [in Ethiopia]. He tried to unify and modernize Ethiopia. He had a vision to become a leader who could modernize and unify Ethiopia. It stated the fall of Emperor Tewodros II in 13 April 1868, as “The dead silence over the hills of Maqdala”, and “It was the suspicious silence!” The work of Philip Marsden, titled the “Barefoot Emperor” has a great impact on this release<sup>19</sup>. Briefly, this broadcast has made review of this wonderful monograph.

The Telegraph, on 14 December 2007 has also published almost the same regarding Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia.<sup>20</sup> The article was entitled: “Mad king Tewodros’ of Abyssinia”. This article also reviewed the Barefoot Emperor and concluded that ‘Without him there would be no modern Ethiopia’. This media also stated that “the fall of Tewodros at Maqdalla was dormant Volcano; this volcano erupted at Adowa”.

## Is the “fall” of Maqdala fame? Glory? or defeat? Whose fame? Glory? Defeat?

According to the sources reviewed, contemporary media mapped Emperor Tewodros II as a hero king. Beside, some studies also stated that Tewodros has symbolically “defeated” General Napier,

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Illustrated London News, 30 May 1868.

<sup>15</sup> Times, 19 October 1981.

<sup>16</sup> The Guardian 3 April 2018; The Art News Paper, 3 April 2018; The New York Times, 4 April 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Shiferaw Bekele, p. 351.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*; BBC broadcast, (2016), the witness, the fall of Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes>.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Marsden, (2007), The Barefoot Emperor: An Ethiopian Tragedy, Harper press: London.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/non-fictionreviews/3669915/Mad-king-Tewodros-of-Abyssinia.html>.

the British general who came to capture him at Maqdala by committing suicide. His heroic effort in defending his country is remembered for centuries in the hearts of generation.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, most contemporary researches and media repeatedly used the word “fall” in describing the debacle of Maqdala in 1868. This study argue that there was no fall at Maqdala, yet, death of Emperor Tewodros II. The word “fall” attached to Maqdala seems Euro-centric. Basically, the statement is used to remember European glory at any cost. In contrary, Emperor Tewodros committed suicide and glorified Ethiopia and its people as well. In this regard, Ethiopia did not fall to British, Abyssinia won! And its generation has won! He died in order to make the unity and modernity of Ethiopia sustainable. The main reason for the death of Emperor Tewodros II were not the British. It was his own maladministration of his own soldiers.<sup>22</sup>

Couplet 1,

ማረ ስ ይሻ ላል መገ በር :

እጅ እግር ይዞ ለመኖር

አላር ስም ያሉ አልነግድ

ተመለ መሉ እንደ ግንድ

(Literally, it is better ploughing and paying tribute; to live having limbs and legs; those who did not willing ploughing and trading were cut into pieces).

The above couplet shows that Emperor Tewodros took punitive majors. This was because, Tewodros gave great attention to military discipline. He believed that it was the absence of this important elements in his army that caused his defeat at the hands of the Egyptians at the Battle of Dabarq in 1848. He had gone to the extent of taking very harsh disciplinary measures on members of his army who failed to carry out his orders or acted without his authorization. For instance, he punished by amputating the limbs of those soldiers who took part in an unauthorized fighting.

Couplet 2,

ገደልን እንዳይሉ ሞተው አገራቸው፤

ማረ ከን እንዳይሉ ሰው ለምክ እጃቸው፤

ምን ይሉ እንገሊዞች ሲገቡ አገራቸው፤

(They [British] couldn't say we killed him, because he was already dead; they couldn't say we handed him, no one was with them; what did they say arriving back home.)

This poem is repeatedly published in domestic Media. This oral tradition tells us that the battle was shame to British, not to Ethiopia. Hence, the battle of Maqdala remained glory to Ethiopia. Some liberal media stated that the battle of Maqdala was a great victory of the invaded. For instance, the telegraph stated that the “fall of Tewodros II at Maqdalla was dormant Volcano; this volcano erupted at Adowa”.<sup>23</sup> If this correct, it can be said that the battle of Maqdala as well as the reign of Emperor Tewodros II has a great contribution to the victory of Adowa. Emperor Menelik II has mobilized the people of the whole country towards the battle of Adowa so easily. This was because, most of the assignment for national unity was previously done by Tewodros II.

It was after 1920s that recognition to unity and modernization dreams of Tewodros II. Before he was considered as cruel leader of a country. To this end Berhan ena selam (light and peace) newspaper seems pioneering media. In its release of Yekatit 2, 1922 E. C. it described about the greatness of Tewodros II's ideas in building the nation through unity and modernity.<sup>24</sup> The above

<sup>21</sup> Tewodros Gebre, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> ተስፋዬአራጌ (2010) በሐገወጥመንገድ ከአገር የወጡ ቅርሶችን ለማስመለስ የተደረገ ጥረት እና በቀጣይ መወሰድ ያለበት አረምጃ (Unpublished).

<sup>23</sup> The Telegraph, 14 December 2007.

<sup>24</sup> ብርሃንና ሠላም ጋዜጣ፣ የካቲት 2 ቀን 1922 እትም. (Berhane ena Selam Newspaper 1930).



newspaper also stated that Tewodros II was the only modern person during the period without any follower and supporter. This resulted for his final disaster at Maqdala.<sup>25</sup>

It was in 1931 that for the first time in history the portrait of Emperor Tewodros was hanged in the walls of the palace with other pictures of political figures. This story was described by Berhane ena Selam Newspaper which was published in Yekatit 25, 1925 (February 1933).<sup>26</sup> Since the mid twentieth century Tewodros II became a popular hero in Ethiopia particularly among intellectuals, novelists, playwrights, and painters.<sup>27</sup>

This research concluded that there could not be victory at Adowa, if there was no the battle of Maqdala. Because, at Maqdala Emperor Tewodros II gave his life to the people of Ethiopia seeking unity and modernity. Hence, the battle of Adowa should be re-interpreted and re-searched.

However, Domestic media has given less emphasis to the battle of Maqdala. In this regard, it seems there is a missing link between the two important battles, Maqdala and Adowa. The researcher believes that the battle of Maqdala should be commemorated like the victory day of Adowa.

## Conclusion

It is clear that the battle of Maqdala and suicidal death of Tewodros II has created a long lasting impression to both foreign and domestic media in their perception of the emperor and creating up of modern Ethiopia. Most of the media, either print, audio, or video, agreed that “without Tewodros no modern and united Ethiopia could be formed”. The foreign media changed their stand after the publication of Philip Marsden’s book entitled the Barefoot Emperor: an Ethiopian Tragedy. Emperor Tewodros II & Maqdala got less emphasis under domestic media. In this regard, it seems, there is a missing link between the two important battles, Maqdala and Adowa. Thus, there should be collective and collaborative work among scholars and the media to remember the battle of Maqdala as a victory day.

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<sup>25</sup>ተስፋዬአራጌ፣ Unpublished.

<sup>26</sup>በርሃንናወላምጋዜጣ፣የካቲት 2 ቀን 1925 እትም. (Berhane ena Selam Newspaper 1933).

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